

The Accounting Profession: Perception vs. Reality

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

High school students and young college students are in a point in their lives where they are thinking about future career paths. Majoring in accounting opens the door to many career opportunities, but negative stereotypes about the profession may discourage students from pursuing accounting as a career. This thesis is intended to inform students about the accounting profession by explaining how the public's misconceptions of the profession differ from the realities. The topics of gender, work-life balance, education and training, social stereotypes, job roles and expectations, career choices, and the work environment are explored.

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Introduction:

Throughout the years, many perceptions have been formed about accountants. The public has formed inaccurate conclusions about accountant's personalities, their physical characteristics, and what tasks they actually perform on the job. Many of these incorrect assumptions come from the accountant's portrayal in different types of media. When it comes to high school and young college students, views of accountants and the accounting profession are skewed by friends and family. It is important that young students are informed of the misconceptions about the accounting profession because these students are choosing their career paths. Knowing the truth about accounting can attract the right kind of students with the right kind of skills to the profession.

In addition to explaining how accounting is portrayed in the media, this thesis discusses in detail a variety of topics about the accounting profession, comparing misconceptions about these topics with the realities. The accounting topics explored in this thesis are gender, work-life balance, education and training, social stereotypes, job roles and expectations, career choices, and the work environment. After reading this thesis, students should be able to make more informed decisions about pursuing accounting as a career.

Accounting in the Media

The general public, especially high school students, are heavily influenced by what they see in the media. Because of this, it is no surprise that most people form incorrect assumptions about accountants from what they see on television and read in books. During a study conducted using focus groups, a particular high school student commented that “on TV, accountants are usually skinny, geeky, glasses; they’re not really the social type” (Wells 156). When describing physical appearance and behavioral characteristics, participants in the same study commented that accountants “have a moustache” and are “formal and hardworking” (Wells 158).

There are many examples of accounting references on televisions that support the above students’ statements. On a comic sketch show named Monty Python, there was a specific scene that involved an accountant and a career counselor. The actor playing the accountant is male and appears to be nerdy and weak. The actor’s look was completed with glasses and a moustache. When the accountant asks his career counselor for a more exciting job, the career counselor responds by telling the accountant, “You are an appallingly dull fellow, unimaginative, timid, lacking in initiative, spineless, easily dominated, no sense of humor, tedious company, and irrepressibly drab. Whereas in most professions, these would be considered drawbacks. In chartered accountancy, they are a positive boon (“Episode 10”).

Often times, the accounting profession is mentioned on crime shows when accountants are involved in criminal investigations. There is a particular episode of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* that shows a scene involving accountants. When detectives were inquiring about a specific account, an employee at the accounting firm

told the detectives that the senior running the account left early for the day. When the detectives were surprised at the senior accountant leaving early in the middle of tax season, the employee responded by saying, "Even accountants have a life" ("Folly").

Not only do accounting references appear in crime television shows, but they also appear in teen soap operas, so these references reach a wide range of audiences. In a particular episode of *The O.C.*, two ladies needed help keeping the books for their new business, so another character offered to hire a "bean counter" to help them ("The Earth Girls are Easy"). The term "bean counter" is often used by the public to describe accountants in a derogatory way. This term narrowly defines the accountant's job role to being the nit-picking employee that is excessively concerned with every dollar a company spends. Although it is true that accountants pay attention to detail, the role of the accountant is not limited to "bean counting". The many roles of accountants are discussed in further detail in a later section of this thesis.

A common typical character in movies and television shows is "Bob from accounting". If the name isn't Bob, it is some sort of simple name, such as Ted, Bill, or Steve ("Bob from Accounting"). The purpose of the "Bob from accounting" archetype is to create a character that is static, two-dimensional, and boring. The fact that this character comes from the accounting department implies that he or she has no personality. This character is often the object of ridicule and embarrassment.

Notable examples of television shows using the "Bob from accounting" type character include television shows from different genres. In an episode of *Friends*, one of the main characters constantly refers to his co-workers as "Financial Services Lowell" or "Brian from Payroll". Some episodes of another comedy, *Just Shoot Me!*, mention

“Baxter from accounting” (“Bob from Accounting”). This type of character is also mentioned on television dramas, such as *House*, who jokes about “Debbie from accounting” and “Berman from accounting”.

Listed above are just a few examples of accountants depicted in the media. There are many more references of accountants made in other televisions shows, movies, and other forms of literature. It is no surprise that the public has formed incorrect perceptions about the accounting profession.

Gender

One of the biggest misconceptions about accounting is that the profession is for men only (Viteri). This perception most likely comes from the stereotypical image of the accountant that is portrayed in the media. In reality, the field is made up of more women than men. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women make up 61% of accountants and auditors in 2014. Women are also earning 52% of bachelor's degrees and 54% of master's degrees in accounting (Thomson et al.). Internationally, it is common for more than half of new hires at accounting firms to be women (Afford & Bennett).

When I had my internship at a public accounting firm, I observed that the firm was made up of about 50% men and 50% women. The firm I interned at was Dauby O'Connor & Zaleski, LLC, and I interacted with both men and women daily. A lot of times throughout my internship I reported to women. Although most of the members of this firm are men, there are a few women that are members too.

The myth about all accountants being male is also likely to come from this fact that most partners and members of accounting firms are male. Even though executive positions in accounting firms are currently dominated by men, women are growing quickly in the leadership area (Viteri). Some of the reasons as to why there are less female partners than male partners come have to do with life outside of work (Viteri). Being an executive of an accounting firm is an intense time commitment. When it comes to having a family, it is more likely than the man rather than the woman has more time to devote to being an executive.

Work-Life Balance

Another myth about accountants is that they have no free time (Carnevale). There are a variety of careers in accounting that don't always involve working long and strenuous hours. Many jobs in corporate accounting and not-for-profit accounting require a traditional 40-hour work week, which leaves plenty of time to achieve a work-life balance. The idea of work-life balance involves properly prioritizing career with personal lifestyle. Many people have the idea that having a career in accounting leaves no time to have a personal life or a family. This is hardly the case.

The most time consuming career path in accounting is to work in public accounting. During the months January through March, public accountants usually work about 65 to 70 hours a week. These long hours can extend into the month of April if the accountant is working with taxes. Even though these are long and strenuous hours, they are only for part of the year, and employees are still able to make time for their personal lives. When I was an intern at Dauby O'Connor & Zaleski, I witnessed many women who were starting and growing their families. Personally, I was able to maintain my friendships and hobbies even though I was working long hours.

The work-life balance concept has become an important factor in maintaining employee satisfaction, especially among women and younger workers ("Work-Life Balance"). As employers become aware of the work-life balance issue among employees, they are taking steps to ensure employees have a more flexible schedule. Some CPAs who work in public accounting even list flexibility as a key reason for choosing the accounting field ("Work-Life Balance").

Education and Training

One of the largest misunderstandings about getting an accounting education is that it will involve adding and subtracting numbers and not much else. Ironically, this incorrect assumption about studying accounting is the result of the accounting curriculum in lower level courses. According to Wells, the study of accounting in high school is one of the most dominant influences on people's perception of accounting (143). The high school accounting curriculum is specific and focuses on the bookkeeping aspect of the profession. The specific curriculum leads high school students to believe that the rest of their accounting studies will be similar to bookkeeping. Many high school students refer to accounting as being "repetitive", and this assumption comes from their classroom experiences (Wells 155). Similarly to the high school students in Wells' study, I had the false impression that accounting was going to be all about bookkeeping, and this idea came from my high school accounting class.

I chose to be an accounting major in college because I really enjoyed my high school accounting class. It was systematic, predictable, and involved little to no writing. This changed greatly once I started studying accounting in college. The subject became more subjective and required more critical thinking as the courses became more advanced. It is important for high school students and young college students to know what all an accounting education entails. Not only will students need to have analytical skills to be successful in the major, but they will need to have communication skills.

Another common myth about accounting and education is that the accounting coursework learned in school is reflective of what goes on day-to-day at an accounting job (Carnevale). The material taught in accounting classes is beneficial when on the job, but each accounting job is different and situation-specific (Carnevale). I found the above statements to be true when I worked in a public accounting firm as an intern. The knowledge that I received from my undergraduate courses served as a basic foundation to be successful at work, but most of what I needed to know to perform well was learned on the job.

Social Stereotypes

There are many incorrect stereotypes that are formed about accountant's personalities and social skills. The usual social stereotype of accountants is "cold, aloof, and impersonal" (DeCoster and Rhode, 651). In a particular study of private school undergraduates, the students revealed that their perceptions of the accountant included the traits, "low in status, conforming, lacking social skills and aesthetic sensibilities passive, weak, shallow, cold, submissive and evasive" (DeCoster and Rhode, 652). A lot of these harshly negative perceptions come from how accountants are portrayed in the media.

There are a variety of psychological tests that contradict the popular stereotypes about accountants' personalities. These tests show that not all accountants are automatically nerdy and socially awkward. There is a specific psychological study that found that accounting students tended to show stronger adherence to social norms and values than did psychology students (Aranya, Meir and Bar-Ilan, 141). Analysis of other psychological test scores from other studies of CPAs show that these scores did not support the accountant's stereotype, and this was especially true for the younger CPA firm employees (DeCoster and Rhode, 651).

When I interned at Dauby O'Connor & Zaleski, I interacted with people of all personality types. Some people were quiet, but most were lively and talkative. As a new intern, I was welcomed with warm and friendly people, which contrasts the cold, stiff, and boring accountant stereotype.

Because of the stereotypes of accountants' personality traits, many students enter the accounting field of study because they think accounting is predictable. They think they won't have to talk to anyone (Moulton). However, working in the accounting profession requires communication because accountants all have to work with clients, employees, vendors, and clients' customers (Viteri). The misconceptions about accountants' social skills contribute to the misunderstandings about what it is accountants actually do for a living.

Job Roles and Expectations

The biggest misunderstandings about accountants have to do with their job roles and the necessary skills they are expected to have. Many people falsely perceive accountants as being good at math. Mindy Viteri, the author of *Top 10 Accounting Myths – Busted!*, relates how often her family and friends will ask her “You’re the accountant, how much is this?” Viteri goes on to say that if she is not near a calculator, she won’t readily calculate anything. Like Viteri, I am not able to do complicated mental math at the drop of a hat. Because I am an accounting major, my family and friends always expect me to be able to complete complex calculations in my head, but I always have to explain that I’m not able to do so. Accountants are not mathematicians.

It is assumed that all accountants are good at math because they work with numbers. It is true that accountants must know how to do basic functions of math, such as adding and subtracting (with the help of a calculator), but according to Viteri, the “meat and potatoes” of accounting is research and storytelling. Accounting is about much more than calculating numbers. It is about using those numbers to help companies make decisions and to communicate to clients. Accountants must be able to take accounting and turn it into an understandable language for clients from all different business backgrounds (Viteri). Accountants often inform clients of their financial condition, so it is important that accountants are able to teach and relate to clients. Jeannie Patton, the vice president of Students, Academics, and Membership for the American Institute of CPAs, further explained the role of the accountant. She claims “the accountant’s role is not just to provide data, but also to analyze and interpret information to sustain and grow the business” (“Breaking the Boring Accountant

Stereotype”). Accountants are expected to communicate effectively rather than sit alone in a cubicle all day.

Another misconception about the job roles of accountants has to do with the accountant’s role in a business. The accountant is often thought of as just being the “back-office number cruncher” (Moulton). In a conducted study, a number of actual accountants were surveyed. The accountants seemed to believe that they were perceived by non-accountants as “a necessary evil”, “roadblocks to progress”, and “the providers of bad news” (Wells 106). Many people have the false idea that accountants are somewhat removed from the core functions of a business.

Accountants are vital to a business as they serve many different purposes. Dianne Hunnam-Jones, the president of Accountemps, claims that the accountant’s role “is becoming much more integrated with operations, making it an exciting time for accounting” (Moulton). In today’s business world, accountants are more directly involved with strategy and decision-making. The decision-making role is especially prominent in the management accountant’s career. Management accountants help to maximize a company’s profits by acting as advisors to top management. The role of accounting has been extended from scorekeeping and audit work to financial planning, assurance services, risk management, and management advisory services (Parker). Accountants have become increasingly significant to business organizations as a result of globalization and internationalization. They have gone from being “bean counters” to “bean growers” (Thomson et al.).

There is a misconception that the accountant’s career is repetitive and unimportant, and this could be discouraging to many students that would excel in the

accounting field. Students must realize that the accounting field is becoming more dynamic. Laws and regulations relating to tax and business compliance are constantly changing, so accountants will always be in demand by companies. With the increasing role of technology in firms, a successful accountant must be able to utilize different computer software and other equipment.

Because many people false perceive the whole accounting profession as being repetitive, there is a concern that accounting will eventually all be replaced with computers and software programs. From my work experience, I can safely say that many simple functions, such as adding, subtracting, and other basic math, are done by computers. Accounting software is useful and time-saving. However, the analytical and conceptual work of accountants cannot be replaced by computers. Computers are tremendously useful tools for accountants, but they will not end up taking over accountants' jobs.

Career Choices

Another misconception about accountants is that they all do taxes (Thomson et al.). Many people believe that accountants are the equivalent of a tax preparer or IRS agent (Viteri). Although some accountants do taxes, there are many more other career paths for someone with a degree in accounting. Accountants can work in all types of industries. It is important that students realize this so they will be encouraged to choose accounting as a major. A director of talent attraction for KPMG states “there is greater interest in the accounting profession as students recognize there is a variety of opportunities for them when they graduate from a university with an accounting degree” (Moulton). Accounting can lead to a variety of career options because it is the “language of business” (“Breaking the Boring Accountant Stereotype”).

Accounting is referred to as the language of business because it provides a standard way to communicate about business activities. All business activities need good accounting for communication with clients, suppliers, stakeholders, and the community (“Accounting as the Language of Business”). Accounting is the backbone of the business world, so being certified in accounting can lead to success in many facets of a business.

According to the American Institute of CPAs, the typical industries accountants usually work in include public accounting, government, non-profit, and private industry. There are also specialized career options that should be looked at closely by accounting students.

The career option most accounting students are exposed to during their accounting education is public accounting. Public accountants work for a public accounting firm and provide a wide range of accounting activities including financial statement preparation, financial analysis, tax work, and consultations (“Accounting Career Paths”). Most public accountants have the Certified Public Accountant certification. Most times public accountants work in an office setting, but they also often travel to different places to meet with clients. My only accounting experience so far has been with a public accounting firm, and I was expected to complete many different tasks. I was constantly moving around when it came to my work location, and I often worked in teams. Public accountants have a versatile job because they work with several clients at once and encounter a wide variety of people.

Another career option for one with a degree in accounting is to become a government accountant. Government accountants work in the public sector to maintain the records for government agencies and businesses whose finances are subject to government regulations (“Accounting Career Paths”). Government accountants can work for federal, state, or local governments. They can also work for law enforcement agencies. Government accountants often help cities and states form and manage budgets so money is spent wisely. Getting involved in government accounting can lead to a career working in many well-known government offices, such as the Internal Revenue Service, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the Department of Agriculture (“How to Become an Accountant”). Working in government accounting can lead to an exciting and dynamic career.

Non-profit accounting is a great career for those with an accounting degree who want to give back to the community. There are many opportunities within the non-profit sector of accounting. Ryan Keith, president of the National Association of Nonprofit Accountants & Consultants (NPAC), claims "It's a far more expansive field than many CPAs realize" (Sheridan). There are many business entities that need non-profit accountants. Some of these entities are churches, fraternal organizations, schools, social and welfare groups, and some hospitals (Sheridan). Being involved in non-profit accounting requires special skills when it comes to following laws regarding taxes. There is a misconception about taxes not being important when practicing non-profit accounting, but this is not true. Non-profit accountants must pay special attention to tax laws and regulations because some entities are tax exempt, and some are partially tax exempt (Sheridan). Non-profit accountants should be careful not to make mistakes when working with taxes for non-profit organizations. Non-profit accountants have a great responsibility in serving the public.

The next accounting career choice to be discussed is private accounting, which is also known as industry accounting. Working in private accounting means working for a single company, which differs from the public accounting career path. Within private accounting, there is financial accounting and management accounting.

Financial accounting involves following the General Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) to formulate financial statements that will be available to parties outside of the organization ("Accounting Career Paths"). Investors, lenders, and stockholders are usually the recipient of these financial statements. Financial accountants are found working in businesses of all sizes.

Management accounting is private accounting that involves performing asset management, budgeting, performance evaluations and cost management ("Accounting Career Paths"). Management accountants provide information to parties inside of an organization, such as managers and controllers. Management accountants look for ways that companies can reduce financial waste and maximize profits ("Accounting Career Paths"). Management accountants work closely with other departments of an organization such as marketing and finance, and their jobs are to make sure that an organization is utilizing resources effectively.

There are a variety of specialized career options that are available for those with an accounting degree. Forensic accounting is one of these options that can be an exciting and rewarding career. This career path is "crime-fighting" and "mystery filled", and it is "miles away from the 'bean counter' accounting stereotype" (Accounting Career Paths"). Forensic accountants are often involved in bankruptcy and divorce cases, but they can also be involved in higher level cases that have to do with crime and fraud. Forensic accountants work for public accounting firms, private accounting firms, banks, insurance companies, law firms, and the IRS ("Accounting Career Paths").

Another exciting career that can come from having a degree in accounting is being a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agent. Most FBI agents are either attorneys or Certified Public Accountants ("Accounting Career Paths"). Accountants can either serve as internal accountants or special agents for the FBI. Internal accountants are responsible for taxes, budgets, and audits while special agents are responsible for investigating financial crimes ("Accounting Career Paths"). A career in the FBI is not the typical career that comes to mind when one thinks of the accounting field.

Some accountants become tax specialists. Tax accountants prepare personal and corporate tax returns and formulate tax strategies ("Accounting Career Paths"). Being a tax accountant requires a thorough understanding of the tax code, and it is helpful to tax accountants to have a legal background.

Contrary to the myth that all accountants do taxes, only some accountants deal with taxes on a daily basis. Evidently, there are many possible careers accountants can pursue once they have their degree. Further training and specialization may be required for certain career paths, but an accounting education provides the basic knowledge and skill sets needed to be successful in the business world.

Work Environment

Many students are discouraged from pursuing accounting as a major because of misconceptions about the accountant's work environment. It is commonly believed that accountants spend all of their time alone in a cubicle. However, accountants work in a variety of work environments. When I served as an intern at the public accounting firm Dauby O'Connor & Zaleski, I worked in a "war room" with other audit staff. This "war room" consisted of employees with different levels of experiences working together and communicating about clients. Contrary to the assumption all accountants work in cubicles, I worked in a team-oriented environment for most of the duration of my internship. I was also offered the opportunity to travel to a client.

Working in a public accounting firm during busy season meant working in a fast-paced environment. I had my own computer and equipment, but I frequently had to relocate my belongings to different locations within the building. My surroundings varied and changed from week to week. Students looking to have a dynamic and stimulating career should not rule out accounting.

Conclusion

After close examination of different aspects of accounting, it is evident that the profession is not as it appears. The media portrays accounting as being a repetitive, boring job that is only done by those who lack personality and communicative skills. In reality, accounting can be a vigorous and rewarding career that requires employees to perform tasks other than number crunching. Most young students falsely perceive accounting as monotonous based on their high school accounting classes.

Like many other high school students, I chose to be an accounting major based on the material I learned in my high school accounting class. It was systematic and predictable. I enjoyed working with numbers and strongly disliked English and writing papers, so I figured accounting was the major for me. As I continued my accounting education, I realized that writing and communication skills are essential to being successful in any major. Because studying accounting ended up being more challenging and analytical than I anticipated, I now feel a sense of fulfillment when completing accounting work. Students should be encouraged to consider accounting as a career because it is more than performing basic calculations. Accountants are valuable to business organizations because they analyze and communicate business information. Accountants understand the “language of business”, and they are the backbone of the business world.

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